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It was the toughest call of his young presidency, and george bush chose an event no less momentous than his first prime-time address to announce that he had found a thin ridge of moral high ground on which to perch. The wrenching decision: whether to lend federal support to embryonic-stem-cell research, unleashing potential cures for horrific illnesses and life-shattering injuries, but at the cost of giving government sanction to the destruction of human embryos. Bush had searched both his soul and his 7-cm-thick briefing book. He had quizzed experts and ethicists and even the doctors in the White House medical unit. In that 11-min. speech, set not in the Oval Office but against an expanse of Texas prairie, the President talked about the dream of wiping out Alzheimer's disease and childhood diabetes but also of the nightmarish "hatcheries" of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. The issue, Bush declared, "lies at a difficult moral intersection, juxtaposing the need to protect life in all its phases with the prospect of saving and improving life in all its stages." The government would move forward carefully, he promised, providing federal money for research on cell colonies that had already been created by that point, August 2001, but not edging one inch further down the slope of destroying additional human embryos. "I spent a lot of time on the subject," he later told reporters. "I laid out the policy I think is right for America, and I'm not going to change my mind."

Now, the once solid ground that Bush staked out almost four years ago is crumbling beneath him, and he will probably soon find himself once again in the middle of an argument that he had declared settled. As early as next week, the Republican-controlled House—the same House that held a Palm Sunday session so that it could deliver a lifeline to Terri Schiavo—is expected to consider legislation that could dramatically expand the number of stem-cell "lines" available to federally funded research by making accessible tens of thousands of embryos that have been created through in vitro fertilization. The bill contains a number of safeguards aimed at ensuring that it would apply only to embryos that would otherwise have been discarded. It stipulates that the embryos must have been created by individuals seeking fertility treatment and who then discovered that they had produced "in excess of the clinical need." It also requires that those donors give permission for the embryos to be used in stem-cell research, and forbids them from receiving any compensation.

As things look now, the bill has a good shot. By the end of last week, 200 members of the House—nearly half—had signed on as co-sponsors to the legislation authored by Delaware Republican Mike Castle and Colorado Democrat Diana DeGette. And the number of supporters is expected to grow when it is put to a vote. Predictions are that as many as 50 Republicans could join Democrats in favor of it. While the legislation presents Republican moderates a rare

opportunity for victory on Capitol Hill, it has also attracted the interest and support of some conservatives who say they discern a growing pro-life case for what embryonic-stem-cell research has to offer.

House passage, all sides agree, would spur action in the Senate, where prospects for an identical bill are just as good, with 58 co-sponsors—just short of a filibuster-proof majority. It helps that the bill's backers are led by Republican Orrin Hatch of Utah, a lion of the pro-life movement. From the Senate, barring some kind of a procedural snag, the bill would wind up on Bush's desk.

That's an excruciating prospect for the White House, made all the more so by the fact that a rejection of the stem-cell legislation would be Bush's first veto ever. Opponents of embryonic-stem-cell research say they have received private assurances from the White House that the President will stay true to his word, and they are working to get enough votes on their side so that the veto cannot be overturned. Meanwhile, White House aides are huddling with some congressional leaders to come up with an alternative measure of some kind that, in the words of one, would "reflect the President's priorities"—and give Republicans political cover for voting against a popular cause. But they say there should be no mistake about where Bush stands. "When the time comes, if it is necessary, we will make it clear that this violates the President's position," says a senior official. "The wall is firm. No question about it."

If so, the President's stance is one of the few markers on the field of embryonic- stem-cell research that hasn't moved over the past four years. When Bush announced his Executive Order limiting federal funding to studies on existing stem-cell lines, he declared that private research had produced more than 60 genetically diverse lines that would be eligible. Researchers now say the number is more like 22, and even those are contaminated with mouse DNA, making them ill-suited for use on humans. Meanwhile, research is moving ahead without Washington's sanction—not only in places like Britain and Singapore but also in a number of states, led by California. The latest Time poll found that 53% of respondents said they would like to see other states follow California's lead. And in a number of states, legislators are doing just that. (See box.)

That may be in part because they are beginning to see the consequences for those that lag. Scientists who depend on federal funding, traditionally some of the brightest minds, now find themselves at a disadvantage, and so many are looking elsewhere. Republican Congressman Mark Kirk, a leading backer of the bill, says universities and research institutions in his Chicago-area district are complaining that some of their top talent is leaving for places that offer stem-cell-research programs. At the same time, the diffusion of this work across the nation also

raises ethical questions, as each state gets to set its own standards. “One of the fears here is that you are going to have a potpourri of different approaches to this—some of them stretches,” says Senator Hatch. “It’s a favor to the world to do this right.”

What excites scientists about the unspecialized stem cells is their potential to develop into any type of tissue, from bone and muscle to skin and blood and nerve. Although there are several kinds of stem cells—including ones found in adult bone marrow and umbilical-cord blood—the most versatile, researchers say, are the ones that come from embryos, because they haven’t yet developed enough to specialize at all. Those are the ones that scientists believe hold the greatest potential for treatment of a wide range of diseases, as well as for repairing damaged nerves and organs.

Backers of expanded stem-cell research say public opinion is swinging their way, thanks in no small part to such high-profile advocates as Nancy Reagan, who has made her late husband’s struggle with Alzheimer’s an emblem of the campaign for stem-cell research. Support is solid even among Republicans, says Republican pollster David Winston, who conducted a poll released last week by New Models, a Republican communication research organization. Surveying 13 Republican congressional districts across the country, Winston found that voters in those areas favored embryonic-stem-cell research an overall 66% to 27%, while Republicans supported it 53% to 37%. This week backers of the bill will try to gin up additional momentum with the launch of a seven-figure television ad campaign.

It also helps that the legislation may be coming to a vote at a politically opportune time for a measure that can rightfully claim to be a truly bipartisan endeavor. Public approval of Congress in the latest Gallup poll stood at an abysmally low 35%, its worst in eight years. Congress hasn’t helped its case much by tying itself up in battles, like the one over the filibuster, that touch the concerns mainly of those within the ideological extremes of both parties.

What brought the expansion of embryonic-stem-cell research to a congressional vote was not a public groundswell, however, but an uncharacteristically deft inside move by a group of Republican moderates who call themselves the House Tuesday Group. For months, they had been looking for an opportunity to get around the House’s rigid procedures and force it to take up the measure, which probably could never have got to the floor through the usual process of committee deliberation. When House Speaker Dennis Hastert needed their votes in what turned out to be a squeaker on the budget last month, the lawmakers, led by Castle, extracted a guarantee that the Speaker would bring the stem-cell measure to a vote. That concession marked one of the few instances in which the tightly disciplined House leadership has agreed to allow consideration of a bill that it does not explicitly support. And yet, says Illinois

Congressman Kirk, who was involved in the negotiations with the House leadership, “it was like pushing on an open door. In a lot of people’s heart of hearts, they agree with us.”

Whatever the inner impulses of members, a vote is certain to bring a backlash from right-to-life groups that constitute a major part of the Republican base. So supporters of the measure have been quietly working the House chamber in what is becoming an intensely personal effort to build a majority one vote at a time. Some lawmakers with pro-life voting records say the vote will be an agonizing choice. “The most difficult moral questions aren’t between right and wrong,” says New Mexico’s Heather Wilson, who says she is still undecided. “They are between right and right.”

Wilson has been visited by lobbyists for universities and groups who advocate for sufferers of various diseases. Fellow Republican lawmaker Charles Bass of New Hampshire gave her a chapter from Hatch’s 2002 memoir Square Peg, in which the Senator explained his own conversion on the stem-cell issue. But the most compelling appeal, Wilson says, has come from a House Democrat—James Langevin of Rhode Island, an abortion foe who is also a quadriplegic as a result of an accidental gunshot wound suffered when he was a teenager. “When Jim Langevin talks to you about this,” says Wilson, “he speaks with a certain understanding that the rest of us don’t have.”

Opponents are not without their own emotionally charged arguments, one of which is that if the bill becomes law, it would only be the beginning of a slide toward human reproduction through cloning. Foes say they also plan to point out that embryonic-stem-cell research has yet to produce a cure for anything. Researchers, they say, should first explore the potential of stem-cell research that does not require the destruction of embryos, including use of adult stem cells and stem cells from umbilical-cord blood. “This is not a debate between pro-science forces and religious zealots,” says Pennsylvania Republican Joseph Pitts. “This is a debate about saving lives.”

Officially, the House Republican leadership has pledged not to pressure its members on the bill, having deemed it a matter of conscience. But majority leader Tom DeLay had been quietly looking for ways to stall it or complicate its progress through the legislative machinery. House sources say he stepped back from that effort after moderate Republicans reminded Speaker Hastert that he had promised them a clean shot at passage. Meanwhile, an alternative strategy is being discussed that would give House members the opportunity to also vote on an additional piece of stem-cell legislation, possibly a bill by Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey that would establish a national bank to store and distribute stem cells from the blood of umbilical cords. The idea is to take off some of the political heat by giving both lawmakers and Bush a

stem-cell bill to support, in addition to the one they have vowed to kill.

Whatever the outcome, if there’s anything that politicians have learned about embryonic-stem-cell research, it is that the science has a way of always moving forward. The question now is how far Washington is ready to move with it.